



*Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals*



*Observing 95 Years*

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*Promoting and*

*Advocating for the*

*Effective Leadership*

*of School Principals*

## **Changing the Compulsory School Age**

*By Jim Ballard Executive Director*

*Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals*

Again, the Michigan Legislature is considering changing the “right of passage” enjoyed by several generations of Michigan’s children. The freedom to leave formal schooling at age sixteen.

The reasons for such a change are compelling. The economic future of a non-high school graduate is dismal. This change is a troubling notion to those responsible to enforce this public policy, **but our times compel a change in an antiquated law.**

When asked, many secondary school principals don’t like the change. Principals are on the front line, experiencing daily, the adolescent power struggle with rules, laws, and adults in general. It is a natural behavior, teenagers press to gain perceived rights. Principals have good reason to object to being the enforcer of one more public policy that does not enjoy support by those to whom it effects – those under the age of 18. Secondary School Principals are right to have reservations, but for our state to thrive in the future, we must expect all students to stay in school and strive for a technical certificate or college diploma.

Principals in other states have experienced a similar change in public policy. As they look back over their experience they tell us they were against it at first, but now more kids are in school, and the truancy problems that were experienced with 15 and 16 year old students, are now waged at 17 and 18.

- Let’s be real. If the law is changed with immediate effect, we go from 48,500 dropouts to 48,500 truants, overnight! If the Legislature approves the law it should be phased in. It should begin for those students who are now in the lower elementary grades. As they mature they will not know the “right of passage” of compulsory attendance owned by former generations.
- Clearly, the enforcement of the compulsory school age law becomes an issue. The current truancy enforcement system is non-effective. The decision maker regarding enforcement is the elected county prosecutor. Many prosecutors do not see this as an important role for their office. A fix needs to take place before such a change occurs.
- Often, students leave school because of frustrations with the school process. School systems, community colleges, Intermediate School Districts, and Juvenile Court systems must collaborate to provide alternative models of instruction as students mature. Some pockets in Michigan provide wonderful alternatives for students. State policy must expand these opportunities for all of Michigan’s students.
- As the courts and legislatures have recognized there are additional costs for students with disabilities, the legislature must recognize there are additional costs for such alternative programming.
- Importantly, future state policy must continue support for the school community and allow enforcement of student expectations that lead to a safe and orderly environment to produce a good learning environment for all our students.

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There is good and bad public policy. It could be easy for a legislator to amend the compulsory education law by just crossing out the number sixteen and replacing it with the number eighteen; then sit back and watch what happens, and point a finger of blame if there are problems. It is up to school personnel and Michigan's citizens to make sure legislators develop good public policy by dealing with the above issues as part of any change to current law.

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